

# Art Therapy Online: ATOL

## **Allowing the Artwork to Speak: The use of a visual display as research method in a retrospective study of four years' artwork in art therapy with a four-year old boy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the curating of a visual display of all the artwork from a child's art therapy for the purpose of understanding the art processes and managing a very large number of pictures. The paper is in two parts: a video documenting the display and an accompanying text. The visual display, arranged chronologically, was found to produce useful information for research and preserve the freshness of the original intent of the child in making the work. The information gathered offers rich pathways to follow in further research into this case. It is concluded that a review of all the pictures, whether in exhibition format or in a more informal review, helps to isolate and foreground the narrative of the art making and offers an effective and unbiased way for an art therapist to gather data to write case studies.

**Keywords:** art therapy research, visual display, retrospective review of the images, visual methodology, art process, curating

### **Introduction**

An on-line journal has the special capacity to show film and photographs which more closely represent what we see in reality. This gives the therapist working with a visual medium a unique opportunity to share and question ideas about the images and art processes of art therapy. My focus in this paper is a video about the curating of a private visual display of the complete artwork of a child's art therapy for the purpose of research. The material relates to art therapy which was completed seven years ago; the visual display and filming were carried out in the month before the ending of therapy. The young child who made the work was not involved in the display as the purpose of it was to gather and organise the artwork so that I could reflect on it and reach new understandings about the function of the art process. After careful consideration my clinical supervisor and I felt that it would be confusing for this particular child to see his pictures presented in this way, transformed into an artist's exhibition.

The display has produced questions that I have yet to consider. The visual nature of a video appealed to me as a means of describing the process but an introductory written text seems important to put the material in context and to locate my research methodology in the art therapy literature. I will also describe some of the ways in which the experience of curating and reflecting on the display helped my study and made me reconsider my approach to writing art therapy case studies in the future.

### **The context of the art therapy**

The geographical and social context of my case material is an inner London primary school where I worked for thirteen years as an integral part of the Special Needs team. My starting point in this research was the desire to increase my understanding of the artwork in art therapy of a young boy ('Alistair') because he was a patient who invested so much importance in his art-making. His art therapy was evidently successful in allowing change and emotional stability sufficient for him to be able to function in school through periods of extreme anxiety when he was in changing foster placements. I have previously written one type of narrative about this child in terms of the value of art therapy as a support for a Looked-After child through periods of changing foster placements, suggesting that the context of school can be a useful base for therapy to provide continuity and regulation of emotions (Prokofiev, 2010). Alistair suffered early physical and emotional neglect which left him in a confused and boundaryless state when he came to nursery school and then primary school, with little understanding of how to connect himself meaningfully to

the world around him. For the first nine months of art therapy when he was four years old, he was living at home with his mother and older brother; for the following two years he and his brother were placed in a hostel for Looked-After children while their future care was assessed and art therapy was then offered twice weekly. In the final nine months of art therapy, Alistair was living with a long-term foster family in a different area and attended a new school where I was able to travel to continue working with him to help with the transition to this new placement and school. One distinctive character of this case therefore relates to the fact that there were these three contrasting contexts or objectives for art therapy, which implied that he might need to use art therapy in different ways for what emerged as different purposes. It was not until I had put up the display that I could see the differences clearly.

Another distinct characteristic which made the visual data of this case so unusual amongst my patients and prominent in my mind was that Alistair made over 600 images on paper, most of which were figurative and included more self-portraits and pictures of the letters of his name than any other theme. The making of self-portraits would seem to suggest the need to explore identity or to hold onto identity through change and loss of his original home and family but I felt that research to test my hypothesis was important.

I was also curious to see what would come out of a close study of one longitudinal case in art therapy with a child and whether the findings might cast light on the function and meanings of art processes and products in art therapy with children more widely.

#### **Visual research methodology**

A visual methodology which helps the researcher to put previously held assumptions to one side and allow her to come to the material with fresh eyes and an attitude of discovery is important – I had already found Schaverien's visual research method, the 'retrospective review of the pictures' (Schaverien 1991, 1993, 1995) a useful method when studying the non-figurative paintings of a 9-year-old boy. In this instance, my findings had helped me understand the value of his process of using concrete, sensory materials which led him to discover a sense of his own agency for the first time (Prokofiev 2011).

With 600 pictures to review and the offer of a private space in which to hang them all, a display seemed the ideal solution. However, reading some of the literature on curating, I realised that the curator is not without power and that decisions about how to hang images influence interpretation and introduce the subjective. Furthermore, reflecting on the way I have written this paper, I see that I often refer to the visual display as 'my display' rather than 'Alistair's'. Curating gives a sense of ownership! However, a chronological hanging was my choice and I hoped that as far as possible this would allow a narrative to be told by the images themselves without too much interference from me. At the end of the six days of the display, there was a short amount of time to organise smaller hangings according to subject, type and medium, but there is not space to comment on this fully here.

#### **Locating my research in the art therapy literature**

I am not the first person to use a visual display as a research tool (see Mahony 2011). It is a research method closely allied to the 'retrospective review of pictures' outlined by Schaverien (1992, 1993 and 1995). Schaverien's concept is a chronological review of all the artwork to explore meaning in a new context and observe where change occurs with the intention of comparing it to psychological change or improvements recorded in written process notes. Greenwood et al (2007) and Greenwood (2011), Herrmann (2011) and Prokofiev (2011) are all examples of research using this retrospective review as a visual research method and they, like Mahony (2011) write about research of long-term cases in therapy where at least forty works are being reviewed and often considerably more. The large amount of data in all of the cases studied by these authors is part of the attraction of using a visual methodology which can make it manageable.

Herrmann (2011) describes the five stages that Mcleod (1994) identifies in the analysis of qualitative data to explain the stages of his review of a 16-year old blind young woman's artwork. The stages well describe my own process in my research. Beginning with immersion in the material, the researcher goes on to categorisation, phenomenological reduction, triangulation and interpretation. Apart from Mahony, all the authors use their reviews to structure the work into categories that can be worked with or they use the chronological order to help define process. Mahony on the other hand has set herself a different task. Rather than studying the images of her art therapy group to understand specifically what brought about change, she asked questions about how the personal art practice of the art therapist outside and inside the group might link with the artefacts of the group members. She did this through a the creative

process of placing her own artefacts in conjunction with the group's artwork and the reflective experience of seeing the material hanging together led to convincing research findings.

In Schaverien (1992) and Greenwood et al (2007) the artwork is from individual art psychotherapy with adults in psychiatry; Mahony's display is work from a long-term out-patient art psychotherapy group; while Herrmann (2011) reports on research of art therapy in a school for the blind and the artwork of a 16-year old young woman.

In my first research project I studied the artwork of a 9-year old boy whose work was non-figurative (Prokofiev 2011). Initially it seemed unlikely to me that a retrospective review would be useful, but I found that chronological ordering of the images did in fact reveal a development in his ability to form thoughts and that the pictures showed increasing intentionality. Choosing appropriate theoretical frameworks to analyse the pictures once I had organised and looked at the images more closely, was key in my analysis and findings.

All authors describe work where distinct improvements in patients' functioning and mental states occurred and in most cases they set out to demonstrate the link between specific images or certain categories of image with improved mental health as part of the research. Greenwood et al (2007) additionally link findings from the retrospective review to separate quantitative research carried out by a psychologist team in the form of outcome studies throughout and after the end of art therapy. Herrmann's text traces a process through the selection of particular clay sculptures made by his 16-year old patient over five years of art therapy, which leads to theory building in the context of art therapy and blind patients, while Mahony (2011), through the visual medium of a visual display, is able to describe resonances between her own art practice inside and outside the group with artefacts made by her patients.

#### **The visual display**

##### **VIDEO: see contents page**

I have a few points to add about the experience of hanging the display: first, how the visual experience was fundamental in helping me to remember the images and their sequence in the future; second, how it helped me to understand an aspect of the counter transference that I had not understood so clearly before and finally, a comment on the quality or nature of looking at the display.

The display felt like a reflective resting place because of the way in which an ordering slotted into place and all the images had enough space to be seen. I walked through the rooms as if I was getting to know them for the first time. I could see how it would allow me to remember individual pictures in the future now that I could visualise them in groups: categorising in this initial chronological way was crucial as the different rooms and walls within rooms became like pages in a book that I could bring to mind afterwards once they had been given this concrete space for a while. The experience of the display facilitated an ordering of my mind.

Mahony (2011) writes of how her research display revealed the level of anxiety she had been containing for her group when she saw the concrete reality of the images and understood that they were not the 'messy' productions of her memory. She realised that the remembered sense of messiness was the experience of carrying the feelings of the group. An understanding I gained through the experience of curating the display was the level of anxiety I had suffered during Alistair's therapy as the numbers of artworks began to build up. I worried about whether I was doing a good job of looking after the artwork and keeping it all safe ('were some months' work missing; was that particular image I remembered still there?') and this explains the relief I describe in the video. My feelings were a reflection of the anxiety the child himself felt about whether his whole self was held together through the loss of a stable home; for him, his artworks represented parts of himself which needed holding together. It is quite clear how important *seeing* is to understanding and this is especially so of patients we work with who have not been able to internalise a good experience of containment first time round as infants (Alvarez, 1992). The gallery space had provided a good enough containment for the pictures and the way we had hung them carefully was also significant.

At the recent exhibition, 'Ice Age art' at the British Museum, where some images made as long ago as 40,000 BC were exhibited, I was struck by the different way visitors to the museum were looking at the work as well as the questioning rather than defining information notes by the curator. Instead of the usual statements about what things were or their function (although there were some attributions), there was more 'wondering' about things and reserving judgement rather than foreclosing on meaning too quickly. There was a similar attitude as I (and I think most visitors) looked at the work in this visual display of Alistair's work: openness to the frameworks through which these images or their functions might be understood as well as careful and fascinated looking. The amount of work was astounding

and my sense of this was emphasised by the surprise of my fellow researchers who visited the private display. One visitor said of the early work: 'You can see thought beginning to develop'; another person remarked on the eeriness of the child's virtual presence when looking at a paper where Alistair had asked me to mark off his height on paper. This, along with the portraits and the full-size images of Alistair in which I had been asked to draw round his outline as he lay down or, in another picture, to draw round his knees, feet and hands so that a series of ovoid shapes in space were mapped out on paper – all these created a presence of a real boy in the room.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

The objectivity that a visual display or retrospective review of all the artwork of an art therapy intervention allows is very important for the researcher and art therapy case study writer; these visual methods represent approaches to information and evidence gathering based on hard data. Where it is possible for the clients themselves to take part in the review process it allows the checking and cross referencing of memory and meaning as analysis is sought. Different memories and meanings of art therapist and client do not, of course, necessarily cancel each other out but enrich understanding through the involvement of the three voices of image, client and therapist, as seen in Dalley, Rifkind and Terry (1993). Herrmann suggests that, when a retrospective review involving the patient is held at the end of art therapy (or as in Greenwood, 2007, at a period afterwards), the nature of the relationship between art therapist and client has changed from its earlier transference relationship to allow the two to be like researcher and research assistant, objectifying the experience of reviewing the work. Herrmann felt the transference relationship 'dissolved' at this point (2011).

Where clients cannot be included, as in my own research and in Mahony (2011), the opportunity to discuss the work at and after the visual display with research supervisors, is useful and provides a different opportunity to explore meaning. Mahony describes her experience of the conversation with her supervisors during her visual display as completely different from analysing individual artworks in the 'usual' way of art psychotherapy. The display gave my academic supervisors firsthand experience of my client which was missing before when discussion of the work rested on my own experience and descriptions of the child.

The visits of a small number of my fellow researchers to the display helped my research in a different way from what I had envisaged. As the material was so vast and time too limited for them to have time to immerse themselves in the material sufficiently, it was their range of spontaneous responses which equipped me with more data and gave me a list of pointers to areas which I could look at more in the future. My supervisors had the benefit of having already read my preliminary case study of this child's art therapy (written to use later to contrast with the way I intended to write about the role and function of the art making when I had carried out my close study of the images and further research) and we discussed the material after the exhibition which had served to help us hold it in mind through the visibility of the experience. The making and editing of the video included in this journal and the soundtrack I added to it then gave more material for discussion between us and more opportunity for further understanding.

The experience of curating a visual display and reading the research literature around the subject has led me to think about the importance of giving sufficient attention and a loud enough voice to the narrative of the images as a separate and discrete body of data in the preparation of art therapy case study writing. If we are to bring out the elements of art therapy which illustrate the role of the art making and be able to make claims for it as an intervention of choice for certain referrals, we need clarity and detail of the art process to be brought out. I am aware of feeling critical of my approach to writing a case study in the past where I might start with an idea about the nature of the case which I wanted to explore and then consult my process notes to gather and form a narrative as my beginning action. The images became an accompaniment to the verbal text. This approach meant that there was no chance for the sequence of images to demonstrate their process non-verbally or for patterns to be seen which were different from the verbal texts. In a sense I was writing what might be called a psychotherapy case study with illustrations. As I discovered in earlier research using a retrospective review of the pictures (Prokofiev 2011), looking at the artwork separately can allow other therapeutic factors in the art-making to emerge and new theoretical frameworks to be found which extend understanding.

As Mahony says, the visual display is information gathering and a beginning; from here on can start further work of research. The display in my own research helped me to structure the artwork in a way that made it manageable and helped me see processes and understand more about the transference relationship which I could not have found

another way. Now individual themes from the work could be pursued or a longitudinal case study composed where the interpersonal nature of the art making could be brought into the equation and other data from the therapy interwoven with the visual material.

Finally, I return to the display itself and a comment made after the end of the display by one of my supervisors whose academic background is art education rather than art therapy. He said: 'You can observe formal changes in the artwork and try to find meaning in individual pictures in the display, but that is to miss the point...' For him, this artwork was about 'a child trying to curate his life experience'. It seems important not to lose the insights gained by seeing the entirety of the artwork and this comment from someone with a fresh view of the discipline of art therapy is something I carry with me as a reminder of the importance of the art process for a child trying to survive and be himself without the secure base of a primary carer and family home.

### **Biography**

Frances Prokofiev's clinical work as an art therapist began in palliative care with an adult cancer group but has been primarily within the context of mainstream primary schools in the UK. She has also taught at Goldsmiths College London and at the Art Therapy Northern Programme, Sheffield.

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